

(No) Laughing Matter: Modernism and Xavier Nogués' Cartoons¹

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Abstract

This paper discusses the notion of modernism by relating it to three artistic movements – *Modernisme*, *Noucentisme* and the Avant-garde – which developed in Catalonia between the 1880s and the early 1920s. From a common commitment to modernity these three movements produced, nonetheless, widely different aesthetic proposals. Notwithstanding their differences, this paper identifies common features in their artistic practices in order to contribute to the ongoing critical review of modernism. Thus, rather than a self-referential, medium-specific quest with abstraction as a natural endpoint, modernism is presented here as an open, interrogative artistic practice engaged in a debate in pursuit of 'the modern'. This understanding of modernism is then tested against the case of Xavier Nogués, an artist associated with *Noucentisme*, and his contribution to the artistic debate of his time through the necessarily figurative language of caricature.

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Introduction

[1] In the basement of Galeries Laietanes, an art gallery founded in Barcelona in 1915,² visitors came face to face with an unusual art display. The walls of the basement's two rooms were covered by several colourful compositions of large-scale cartoon-like characters celebrating wine and Mediterranean living under classically inspired arches complemented by popular sayings on the virtues of this beverage (fig. 1-4, 10 and 11). The theme was aptly chosen for a basement which, up to that point, had been the building's wine cellar. When in 1915 art

¹ This article is a revised and extended version of the paper "(No) Laughing Matter: Noucentisme, Modernity and Xavier Nogués' Cartoons" presented at the international conference *Southern Modernisms: Critical Stances Through Regional Appropriations*, ESAP, Oporto, 19-21 February 2015.

² Located at Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes, 613.

promoter Santiago Segura (1879-1918) set up the gallery on the ground floor, he decided to turn the basement into a venue for *tertúlia*, or informal discussion among artists, writers and critics on matters related to art and culture. The cellar indeed became a hub of activity attended particularly (but not exclusively) by figures associated to *Noucentisme*, a major artistic, cultural and political movement in Catalonia at the time.



1 Xavier Nogués, partial view of the mural paintings at the Galeries Laietanes cellar, Barcelona, 1915. (*Xavier Nogués: Pintures murals procedents del celler de Les Galeries Laietanes*, exh. cat., Barcelona 1984, 12-13)



2 Xavier Nogués, partial view of the mural paintings at the Galeries Laietanes cellar, Barcelona, 1915. (*Xavier Nogués: Pintures murals procedents del celler de Les Galeries Laietanes*, exh. cat., Barcelona 1984, 16)



3 Xavier Nogués, partial view of the mural paintings at the Galeries Laietanes cellar, Barcelona, 1915. (*Xavier Nogués: Pintures murals procedents del celler de Les Galeries Laietanes*, exh. cat., Barcelona 1984, 9)



4 Xavier Nogués, fragment of wall decoration, originally at Galeries Laietanes, 1915, tempera on plaster, 83 x 70 cm. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona (© MNAC, Barcelona, 2014, photograph by Jordi Calveras)

[2] The basement's decoration had been commissioned by the gallery owner to Xavier Nogués (1873-1941), an artist in the *noucentista* circle. Renowned for his engraving and caricature work, Nogués devised a composition that required taking the language of cartoons out of its traditional printed medium and applying it in full colour and large dimensions on plaster. His innovative display of mural caricature was very well-received and earned Nogués the recognition of his peers. However, this artist's concerns never travelled the route of formal and

aesthetic exploration followed, at the time, by the avant-garde sectors of the Catalan art scene which would ultimately be considered truly modern by international standards. This raises issues as to the art-historical interest of works such as this by Nogués which, however unconventional and appreciated by his contemporaries, appear detached from the stylistic, self-referential enquiries historiographically attributed to the modernist avant-gardes. Why, then, even consider this work in a volume devoted to modernism? Precisely, one could argue, because it poses the problem that Hans Belting described as the historiographical “embarrassment about non-avant-garde in and after modernism, which yet defies classification”.³ In other words, taking into account its lack of affinity to any post-impressionist, cubist, futurist and/or abstractionist premises, what does a work like Nogués’ mural project bring to the art-historical narrative about the development of modern art?

[3] In order to address these questions, this paper builds on the ongoing critical review of the notion of modernism, which proposes a broader definition of the term not restricted to a formalist reading. It then considers how this more comprehensive understanding of modernism fits in with the Catalan art scene of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and it moves on to ascertain the contribution of an artist such as Nogués to the development of modern art in that milieu regardless of its degree of affinity to a formalist modernist canon.

A broader understanding of modernism

[4] In a general sense, modernism has been defined as a consciousness of modernity, a positive inclination to ‘modernize’, a strive for ‘the modern’.⁴ When applied specifically to art, the term has long referred to a pursuit of the modern through a narrowly defined “intentional and self-critical preoccupation with the demands of a specific medium, and its originality with regard to the precedent that medium avails”.⁵ It is an understanding of modernism, theorized among others by Clement Greenberg since the late 1930s, that stresses the autonomy of art with regard to society, its focus on innovation and its preoccupation with nothing outside the medium itself, therefore tending towards abstraction.

[5] Though hugely successful, this understanding of modernism has been the subject of increasing scrutiny since the late 1960s when critics began to question the exclusively formal pursuit it claimed for modern art. This revision broadened the field of study to other artistic proposals that had striven for modernity in a variety of ways. In time, it also led to a wide acknowledgment that “the larger story of modernist painting in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries is that of a plurality of modernisms or, say, of modernist adventures”.⁶

³ Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, Chicago / London 2003, 167.

⁴ Charles Harrison, “Modernism,” in: *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, Chicago / London 1996, 142-145, here 143.

⁵ Harrison, “Modernism,” 147.

⁶ Michael Fried, *Manet’s Modernism or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s*, Chicago / London 1996, 410.

[6] Faced with this diversity, then, the question arises as to what all of these 'adventures' have in common to allow us to label them modernist in one way or another. Departing from the formalist canon, Christos M. Joachimides proposed a more comprehensive definition of modernism as "an artistic attitude [...], a dialectical quest [...] with an inbuilt theory of innovation".⁷ The dialectical and innovative dimensions of this definition would certainly encompass the purely aesthetic concerns championed by formalist modernism, but they would also explain the broader range of modernist proposals that entered the art debate in the 20th century (and beyond, according to Joachimides). The debate, in this author's view, revolved around four pairs of key concepts: reality-distortion, abstraction-spirituality, language-material, dream-myth. Leaving aside the precise terms of the debate proposed by this author, it is rather his underlying understanding of modernism as a modern artistic practice rather than a formal canon, as an artistic debate through innovation – or rather experimentation – that I will be exploring here for the Catalan case.⁸

[7] It is worth noting, however, that for all the critical revision undertaken of the concept of modernism, the exclusionary formalist view of the term appears to have retained some of its appeal. As noted by Christopher Wilk as recently as 2006, "this widely accepted definition, with its emphasis on aesthetic formalism and its rejection of any relationship between art and society, especially with popular culture, [has] survived remarkably intact and is still used, with some modification, today".⁹

[8] The endurance of this definition is countered in turn by initiatives such as the 2015 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou under the title *Modernités plurielles*.¹⁰ In the accompanying catalogue Catherine Grenier calls it a "manifesto-exhibition, presenting a refreshed and broadened view of modern art" which pays tribute to "the exceptional diversity of artistic forms created from 1905 to 1970".¹¹ Here, too, modernism is defined as "a dialectical relationship", a rich and complex debate taking place between two poles: partaking in the transformations of modern life, and reflecting on the nature of art.¹²

⁷ Christos M. Joachimides, "The Age of Modernism," in: *The Age of Modernism: Art in the 20th Century*, ed. Christos M. Joachimides and Norman Rosenthal, exh. cat., Stuttgart / Berlin 1997, 9-12, here 9.

⁸ The notion of the modernist artistic practice as an informed critical debate discussed here is also much indebted to the notion of the disciplinary field of art history itself as an informed critical debate, expressed in Joana Cunha Leal, "A Montanha Mágica," in: *L+Arte* 67 (January 2010), 12-13.

⁹ Christopher Wilk, "Introduction: What Was Modernism?," in: *Modernism 1914-1939: Designing a New World*, ed. Christopher Wilk, London 2006, 12-21, here 13.

¹⁰ *Modernités plurielles 1905-1970*, ed. Catherine Grenier, exh. cat., Paris 2015.

¹¹ Catherine Grenier, "A history of global art," in: *Modernités plurielles 1905-1970: l'exposition / the exhibition (album)*, Paris 2015, 2-3, here 3.

¹² Michel Gauthier, "Abrégé d'histoire du Modernisme," in: *Modernités plurielles 1905-1970*, 32-34, here 32.

[9] A key aspect of this exhibition, for the purposes of this article, is that it also paid particular attention to the art being produced outside the main artistic centres, both in Europe and beyond. And it did so from a fresh perspective, by

*[bearing] witness to the open and discontinuous temporalities that generate the exchanges and processes of reaction from artists to propositions formulated by the avant-gardes. By confronting the canonical perspective of a linear succession of artistic movements to a history drawn from the margins and peripheries, [the exhibition substituted] a cartography of connections, transfers, but also resistances, in lieu of the history of influences.*¹³

[10] In this regard, the exhibition recognised the key role played by art magazines in the construction of the modern artistic space beyond national borders,¹⁴ an aspect that will also be looked at below in respect of the Catalan case.

Modern art in Catalonia

[11] Barcelona constitutes a clear instance of artistic activity developed outside the main centres, though in close dialogue with them, thus offering the types of connections, transfers, and also resistances described above by Grenier.

[12] Grasping the development of modern art in Spain in the first decades of the 20th century becomes particularly complex in the case of Catalonia due to the co-existence in the region of two different yet interrelated currents: *Noucentisme* and the Avant-garde. Considering these artistic currents in the light of a critical revision of the concept of modernism is further complicated by the presence in the region of an additional movement that preceded both *Noucentisme* and the Avant-garde and called itself *Modernisme*, the Catalan word for modernism.

[13] For the sake of clarity, the historiographical convention for these three categories could be summarized in very simplistic terms as follows: *Modernisme* developed from approximately the mid-1880s, started to wane at the turn of the century, and can be largely (though not solely) associated with European art-nouveau movements, albeit – and of particular interest for this article – much less so in painting;¹⁵ *Noucentisme*, for its part, emerged in 1906 as part of a broader political and cultural renovation programme promoted by the local bourgeoisie and, in artistic terms, advocated an art that was both modern and Catalan, open to the European avant-gardes, but in touch with the region's classical Mediterranean heritage and its popular culture;¹⁶ finally, the Avant-garde developed in parallel to *Noucentisme*, but was more confrontational and even more receptive to the formal artistic enquiries pursued in major European

¹³ Grenier, "A history of global art", 3.

¹⁴ Mica Gherghescu, "Grilles et arborescences: Le rôle des revues dans la construction de l'espace artistique moderne," in: *Modernités plurielles 1905-1970*, 39-51.

¹⁵ Carmen Belen Lord, "The New Art: Modernisme," in: *Barcelona and Modernity: Picasso, Gaudí, Miró, Dalí*, ed. William H. Robinson, Jordi Falgàs and Carmen Belen Lord, Cleveland 2007, 34-41.

¹⁶ Martí Peran i Rafart, Alícia Suàrez and Mercè Vidal i Jansà, eds., *El Noucentisme: un projecte de modernitat*, Barcelona 1994.

centres, most notably Paris.¹⁷ In the Catalan context, based on this characterization – however flawed by its simplicity – only the artistic proposals identified as avant-garde would qualify internationally as modernism under a strictly formalist definition of the term. And yet, however short they seem to fall on the ‘formal modernity’ scale when compared to their avant-garde counterparts, works by self-acknowledged *modernista* and *noucentista* artists had an unequivocal modernizing intent, too. An intent, a belief in modernity, and a strive to bring it to the arts that led the first of these artistic movements to actually adopt ‘modernism’ as its name long before formalist modernism was theorized. Indeed, in the Catalan context, the term modernist was used for the first time in relation to art, as a positive characterization,¹⁸ in 1884 in a literary criticism magazine entitled *L’Avens* (later *L’Avenç*, meaning advance or progress). The purpose of the magazine was stated thus: “L’Avens advocates (and will always attempt to advocate) the cultivation in our country of an essentially modernist literature, science and art.”¹⁹ It was this same intent, belief in and striving for the modern that led the second of these movements to take on the name of the new century (*Noucentisme*, literally twentieth-century-ism) as an expression of belonging to an even newer time, one that had ostensibly moved on even from *Modernisme*.²⁰

[14] What we see, therefore, is a general commitment to modernity that was very much palpable in Catalan society, particularly its elites, from the closing decades of the 19th century. This consciousness and strive for modernity in a general social, economic, technological and cultural sense was embodied, for instance, in Barcelona’s enthusiastic organization of its Universal Exposition of 1888. This event “offered Catalans a historic opportunity to evaluate their region in the context of vanguard European culture, technology and industry; it also established a decisive formal precedent for a modern cosmopolitan outlook.”²¹ Artists, too, shared in this drive. In the art scene it took the form of a concern with artistic modernity that sought to leave behind academic constraints and that was pursued, albeit in a diversity of styles, by all three currents: *Modernisme*, *Noucentisme* and the Avant-garde. What can be seen in the Catalan milieu of the time is therefore a common and multifaceted commitment to the modern in art,

¹⁷ William H. Robinson, “Avant-Gardes for a New Century,” in: *Barcelona and Modernity*, 304-318.

¹⁸ Previous uses of the term modernism in Europe hark back to the first decades of the 18th century. These early uses apply mostly to literature and are, in any case, derogatory: “At the height of the Battle of the Books, the suffix *ism* – indicative, among other things, of irrational adherence to the principles of a cult – was added to the term modern not by the moderns themselves but by their adversaries.” Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Durham, N.C. 1987, 68.

¹⁹ *L’Avens* 22 (15 January 1884) (my translation). The emergence and development of the concept of modernism in Catalonia has been traced by Joan Lluís Marfany, *Aspectes del Modernisme*, 8th ed., Barcelona 1990, as quoted in Belen Lord, “The New Art: Modernisme,” 41.

²⁰ Peran i Rafart, Suàrez and Vidal i Jansà, *El Noucentisme*, 49.

²¹ Belen Lord, “The New Art: Modernisme,” 35.

an existence of plural modernities – to borrow the term from the Pompidou 2015 exhibition –, as has already been acknowledged and explored in depth in *Barcelona and Modernity: Picasso, Gaudí, Miró, Dalí*,²² a comprehensive 2007 exhibition encompassing these three movements in art and architecture.

[15] However, the modernising intent observed in *Modernisme*, *Noucentisme* and the Avant-garde, by itself, does not justify bringing them under the 'umbrella' of modernism. For this, it would also be necessary to ascertain these movements' degree of engagement with the notion of art as a critical debate with a focus on experimentation. This, in turn, should provide a way to account for the contribution of artists not aligned with the formal avant-garde, such as Xavier Nogués, to the development of modernist art in Spain through the specific context of Catalonia.

The modern practice of art: Modernisme, Noucentisme and the Avant-garde

[16] *Modernisme*, *Noucentisme* and the Avant-garde are rightly treated in historiography as three distinct categories. Even allowing for the considerable diversity that can be seen within each one, and for any aesthetic overlaps between them, they can be understood as three different artistic propositions with which practitioners generally identified themselves. From a non-formalist perspective, however, they also have much in common both between them and with the modern practice of art developing elsewhere in Europe and beyond.

[17] Firstly, as has already been mentioned, all three movements were characterised by a striving for artistic modernity, a will to create art that was 'modern'. The inverted commas here are used to stress the imprecision of the concept. References to 'modern art' crop up in the art magazines of the time whether they are associated with *Modernisme*, *Noucentisme*, or the Avant-garde. Yet exactly what was meant by the term is seldom clearly specified. 'Modern' seems to refer to something desirable in art; some quality that distanced it from outdated academic teachings – that valued illusionistic effects, compositional principles and highly polished renditions of subjects neatly ranged in genre hierarchies – and instead turned it into an innovative form of expression attuned to its time.²³

[18] A second feature that all three movements have in common is an experimental approach to artistic practice. Unfettered from academic constraints, artists searched for that desired modernity by trying out new forms of expression, new subjects, new concepts. In the concrete field of painting, the emergence of a formal investigative approach, which was unprecedented in the Catalan art milieu, has been credited to *modernista* artists Ramon Casas and Santiago

²² *Barcelona and Modernity: Picasso, Gaudí, Miró, Dalí*, ed. William H. Robinson, Jordi Falgàs and Carmen Belen Lord, exh. cat., Cleveland 2007. The exhibition took place at the Cleveland Museum of Art and at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

²³ Anonymous, "Un pintor de son temps," in: *Forma* 24 (December 1907), 447-448; Anonymous, "El futurisme 'Sic'," in: *Vell i Nou* 21 (15 March 1916), 8.

Rusiñol following sojourns in Paris.²⁴ Pictorial enquiry was equally pursued by Isidre Nonell, traditionally presented as a second-generation *modernista*, and by Pablo Picasso, who at the close of the century was working in Barcelona in close contact with the *modernista* circle.²⁵ It can also be seen in the work of *noucentista* artists such as Joaquim Sunyer (fig. 5) who is often cited as this movement's most noted representative.²⁶ And it took its most radically anti-academic form in the work of avant-garde artists such as Rafael Barradas and his *vibrationist* paintings.



5 Joaquim Sunyer, *Paisatge de Mallorca* (Majorcan Landscape), 1916, oil on canvas, 125.5 x 100.5 cm. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona (© MNAC, Barcelona)

[19] Experimentation, however, was not limited to the purely aesthetic. Artists were also asking themselves about what constituted a relevant subject for a modern painting or sculpture, and indeed also questioning how much that subject actually mattered. Furthermore, artistic enquiries went beyond form and subject. The period also saw artists testing new media and pushing the boundaries of what could be considered a work of art at all. Thus, practitioners who had been conventionally trained in drawing, painting and sculpture began to take an interest in forms outside of the 'fine arts' category, such as graphic design, ceramics, glass and metalwork, among others. An illustrative example of this in the Catalan milieu is provided by posters, ceramics, glass and textiles, which became collectable forms of modern art thanks to the innovative exploration of these media initiated by *modernista* artists²⁷ and subsequently pursued by both *noucentista* and avant-garde practitioners. This resulted in a "transition of the

²⁴ Belen Lord, "The New Art: Modernisme," 36.

²⁵ On Picasso's interaction with the *modernista* circles at the time, see Jordi Falgàs, "Picasso's Fellows at the Tavern: Beyond Modernisme?," in: *Barcelona and Modernity*, 96-101.

²⁶ In painting, along with Joaquín Torres-García. See, for instance Narcís Comadira, "The Forms of Paradise; Noucentista Painting and Sculpture," in: *Barcelona and Modernity*, 249-259.

traditional to the modern vernacular",²⁸ an 'elevation' of popular crafts to the category of modern art that is visible in *Modernisme*, *Noucentisme* and the Avant-garde.

[20] Thirdly, in all three movements, and unlike any preceding practice, artists were willing to engage in a mutually critical process in their search for an art that deserved to be called 'modern'. No longer subject to crucial assessment by an official academy, artists promoted their own platforms to discuss and judge each other's work as well as the artistic propositions being developed elsewhere in Europe. This critical debate took place through artists' groupings or associations that organized their own exhibitions, promoted cultural events and met regularly to discuss their artistic concerns. These included, for instance, the *Modernista* Festivals promoted by Rusiñol in Sitges between 1892 and 1899; the artists' association *Les Arts i els Artistes*, created in 1910 and mostly linked to *Noucentisme*; the *Athenea* association in Girona, also *noucentista*; and *Agrupació Courbet*, initiated in 1918 and generally related to the Avant-garde. The modern practice of art required artists to develop a greater consciousness of their practice and discuss it with their peers. Lively discussions became a fixture for modernista artists at the Quatre Gats café in Barcelona and Cau Ferrat in Sitges; for its part, as already mentioned, the cellar at Galeries Laietanes, also in Barcelona, was actively promoted as an artistic den. Though largely frequented by *noucentistes*, it also attracted other more avant-garde practitioners of the Catalan art scene whose work was exhibited in the gallery above.

[21] Crucially, the period in question also saw the emergence of periodicals – often with the financial backing of members of the bourgeoisie – that for the first time made it their explicit purpose to serve as platforms for debate with a view to modernizing art and literature. Examples include the aforementioned *L'Avenç* (1881), *Pèl i Ploma* (1899), *Forma* (1904), *Futurisme* (1907), *Correo de las letras & de las artes* (1912), *Revista Nova* (1914), *Vell i nou* (1916), *Un enemic del poble* (1917) and *L'Instant* (1918) among several others. These can be variously associated to *Modernisme*, *Noucentisme* and the Avant-garde, but especially in the period of *Noucentisme*/Avant-garde some titles seem not to fit exclusively into one or the other category, rather sharing in aspects of both at the same time.²⁹ As pointed out in the *Modernités plurielles* catalogue, these played a key role in the international dissemination of, and local reaction to, artistic proposals being developed throughout Europe. They offered critiques on exhibitions and literary works both at home and abroad – with extensive coverage of the latter – through contributions not only by critics, but, crucially, by the artists and writers

²⁷ See Belen Lord, "The New Art: Modernisme," 40; Francesc Quílez i Corella, "The Art of the Poster," in: *Barcelona and Modernity*, 69-71; Pilar Vélez, "The Decorative Arts of the Modernista Era: European Art Nouveau Plus the Local Tradition," in: *Barcelona and Modernity*, 165-170; Sílvia Carbonell Basté, "Fabrics and Fashion at the Turn of the Century," in: *Barcelona and Modernity*, 171-177.

²⁸ Lord, "The New Art: Modernisme," 40.

²⁹ All of these are available for consultation online on <http://www.bnc.cat/digital/arca/>

themselves. Additionally, most of these publications also included summaries of art-related articles published in foreign magazines.³⁰

[22] This critical debate, moreover, was not exclusive to artists and critics, but rather was made accessible to the general public, too. From the first exhibitions of *modernista* works by Casas and Rusiñol in the 1890s we hear of “particularly bitter critical battles” and “vigorous public dialogue concerning the purpose and character of modern painting”.³¹ It was the same concern with the purpose and character of modern painting that was subsequently taken up in *noucentista* and avant-garde circles with echoes in the general press. In particular, public awareness of the debate on modern art grew considerably through *Pàgina artística*, a weekly section created in 1909 and devoted to art criticism in Catalonia’s main daily newspaper, *La Veu de Catalunya*.

[23] The three common features just described – a commitment to modernizing art, a willingness to experiment, and an engagement in an informed, critical debate on what constituted modern art – are in line with the dialectical innovative quest that characterizes the broader understanding of modernism discussed earlier. They characterize a modern approach to producing art without precedent in the Catalan art milieu. This is not to say that previous artistic practice lacked any degree of experimentation or debate, but when these existed they were sporadic and in any case restrained by academic expectations and by an absence of alternative debate platforms. Also, if any such experimentation or critical debate did occur, they were not associated with any notion of art modernity as this appeared only in the late 19th century.

[24] Based on this, the modernity of art produced by *modernistes*, *noucentistes* and avant-gardists can be assessed not on its degree of adherence to a formal canon issued abroad, but rather on its engagement with this investigative, challenging and critical debate on what modern art should be. This debate no doubt included positions championing the “self-sufficient rightness of colour and shape”³² that would come to be synonymous with formalist modernism; but neither was there a consensus on this point nor was this the only issue at stake. Both in their practice and in their writings, we see artists adopting a firm anti-academic stance – common to *modernista*, *noucentista* and avant-garde positions³³ – to then discuss a broad range of issues related to the nature and purpose of modern art: to what degree should it be socially engaged or pursue purely (or rather, predominantly) aesthetic concerns;³⁴ whether painting should

³⁰ The critical dynamism of the Catalan art scene in the context of *Noucentisme* and the Avant-garde becomes apparent in the broad variety of art initiatives listed in Joan M. Minguet Batllori and Jaume Vidal i Oliveras, “Cronologia crítica,” in: *Avantguardes a Catalunya 1906-1939: protagonistes, tendències, esdeveniments*, ed. Daniel Giralt-Miracle, exh. cat., Barcelona 1992, 469-600.

³¹ Belen Lord, “The New Art: Modernisme,” 37.

³² Clement Greenberg, “Picasso at seventy-five” [1957], in: *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Boston 1989, 59-69, here 62.

³³ See, for example, Miquel Utrillo, “Els honors i els cegos,” in: *Pèl & Ploma* 2 (10 June 1899), 1; Anonymous, “Francis, franciscà,” in: *Revista Nova* 2 (18 April 1914), 5.

aim at flatness or it could also legitimately contemplate volumetric effects;³⁵ whether it should attempt a clean break with the past, or rather incorporate any of its own traditions;³⁶ whether it should concern itself with human emotion, reason or spirituality;³⁷ whether it should somehow try to capture the vibrancy of modern industrial life, or find instead a transcendental essence in some form of perceived primitiveness;³⁸ and whether “popular” and “low” art forms constituted worthwhile pursuits for artists,³⁹ among other issues.

[25] Again, it is this understanding of modernism – not as an artistic canon that judges the modernity of a work of art based on exclusively formal criteria, but rather as an experimental, informed, critical approach to creating art in pursuit of modernity – which allows the art-historical value of work such as Xavier Nogués’ to be assessed on the grounds of its contribution to the contemporary critical debate on modern art.

Xavier Nogués’ engagement in the modernist debate

[26] Xavier Nogués (1873-1941) combined training in his native Barcelona, from the age of sixteen, with a formative period in Paris where he travelled in 1901, set up an atelier with Alejandro de Cabanyes and attended two art academies, Colarossi and Vity. He subsequently stayed in the French capital in 1903-04, 1912 and 1921.⁴⁰

[27] Despite his early training, he devoted himself to art relatively late in his life. *The card players*, considered to be his first major work, was published in *Papitu* magazine in 1909, when Nogués was already 36 years old. Previously, his only known works are a number of landscape paintings from a formative phase (dated 1903-1904) and occasional illustrations published from 1902 in several general-interest magazines.⁴¹ Nogués was a keen observer of the social reality and popular culture around him and, by his own admission, preferred caricature to any other form of art.⁴² Thus, from the moment he began his artistic practice

³⁴ Ricciotto Canudo, "L'Art Cerebrista," in: *Revista Nova* 1 (11 April 1914), 5; Alfons Maseras, "Fórmules i Forma," in: *L' instant* 7-8 (2 January 1919), 13.

³⁵ Joan Sacs, "De pintura mural: I – Les maníes," in: *Revista Nova* 15 (18 July 1914), 7-8.

³⁶ Francisco Acebal, "L'art popular," in: *Forma* 4 (May 1904); Anonymous, "El Futurisme 'Sic'," 8.

³⁷ Pinzell, "Los germans Oslé," in: *Forma* 3 (April 1904); Joan Sacs, "L'astigmatisme del Greco," in: *Revista Nova* 19 (13 August 1914), 5-6; Canudo, "L'Art Cerebrista".

³⁸ Miquel Utrillo, "Forma," in: *Forma* 1 (February 1904); Joaquín Torres-García, "Notes sobre art," in: *Revista de l'Escola de Decoració* 1 (March 1914), 5-9; Joan Sacs, "El barbarisme i el primitivisme artístics en el curs de l'història," in: *Revista Nova* 20 (20 August 1914), 9-10.

³⁹ Francesc Quer, "El senyor Farriols i jo, o La ceràmica i sos misteris," in: *Revista Nova* 1 (1 April 1914), 5; Joan Sacs, "Els vidres d'en Maurici Marinot," in: *Revista Nova* 14 (11 July 1914).

⁴⁰ *Xavier Nogués: pintures murals procedents del Cellar de les Galeries Laietanes*, exh. cat., Barcelona 1984, 5-6.

⁴¹ Cecília Vidal i Maynou, *Xavier Nogués: 1873-1941*, Barcelona 2010, 64.

⁴² Rafael Benet, *Xavier Nogués, caricaturista y pintor*, Barcelona 1949, 49.

more fully he quickly gained recognition as an engraver and cartoonist⁴³ with regular contributions to satirical magazines such as *Papitu*.⁴⁴ This magazine was founded and edited by fellow caricaturist and writer Feliu Elias (a.k.a. Joan Sacs)⁴⁵ with whom Nogués would go on to work closely in other editorial ventures.

[28] Nogués shared fully in *Noucentisme*'s purpose to modernize Catalan art. In 1910, he was a founding member of *Les Arts i els Artistes*, a group of artists "formed in response to the wish for artistic regeneration [which] brought together the most shifting sectors of the art world and represented the most innovative production of the day. [It was] initially, a revulsive in the Catalan art scene."⁴⁶ With the backing of figures from the artistic and political scenes, the group's (largely unrealised) goals included organising two annual exhibitions and founding a museum of contemporary art. In 1911, Nogués contributed to *Almanach dels Noucentistes*, a kind of manifesto for the movement, and he became increasingly active in the artistic debate taking place in Barcelona at the time involving both *Noucentisme* and the Avant-garde.

[29] Before proceeding to discuss Nogués' role in the Catalan art scene of his day, it is worth focusing for a moment on the interplay between these two currents. The distinction between *Noucentisme* and the Avant-garde, though useful for operative purposes, can at times be blurry. To a large extent, this is due to the internal diversity and lack of stylistic cohesion within *Noucentisme*. In effect, the aforementioned *Almanach dels Noucentistes* – a publication promoted by art critic and essayist Eugeni d'Ors – acted as a manifesto of sorts, but did not actually issue stylistic guidelines for artists. Instead, it expressed a new endeavour, a generational break, and a consciousness of the new century while including "works by a wide range of writers and artists who did not necessarily subscribe to one another's postulates".⁴⁷ As a result, art produced within this movement was actually highly heterogeneous.

[30] *Noucentista* art could indeed take many forms, but it was generally underpinned by a common belief in the social role of art. Thus, all its subscribing practitioners were called upon to contribute to the collective project of bringing Catalonia in line with what were perceived to be the most advanced countries in Europe.⁴⁸ Notwithstanding the movement's admiration for such nations, however, the brief was to create an art that was both modern and Catalan, as opposed to a mere import of foreign novelties.⁴⁹ One way to go about it was to tap into

⁴³ Francesc Fontbona, "The Art of Noucentisme," in: *Homage to Barcelona, the City and its Art, 1888-1936*, ed. Michael Raeburn, exh. cat., London 1986, 169-181, here 177.

⁴⁴ For a complete list of Nogués' contributions to periodicals see Vidal i Maynou, *Xavier Nogués*, 64-69.

⁴⁵ Feliu Elias used this, his real name, to sign his paintings. His writings as an art critic were signed Joan Sacs, and his caricatures Apa.

⁴⁶ Minguet Batllori and Vidal i Oliveras, "Cronologia crítica," 472-473.

⁴⁷ Jordi Falgàs, "The Almanach dels Noucentistes: A Hybrid Manifesto," in: *Barcelona and Modernity*, 233-235, here 233.

⁴⁸ *El Noucentisme: un projecte de modernitat*, ed. Martí Peran i Rafart, Alícia Suàrez, and Mercè Vidal i Jansà, exh. cat., Barcelona 1994.

⁴⁹ Fontbona, "The Art of Noucentisme," 174.

Catalonia's classic Mediterranean heritage, with a firm focus on order and structure, as theorized by Eugeni d'Ors. In this sense, *noucentista* art criticism even advocated a "Mediterranean School of Painting";⁵⁰ this view placed modern Catalan art within a supra-national cultural region that also encompassed Southern France, Italy and Greece. Another major tenet of *Noucentisme* art theory, determinedly promoted by critic Joaquim Folch i Torres, was that the essential Catalan values that would guide this modern project were to be distilled (not merely transposed) from popular art and culture.⁵¹

[31] However, this quest for Catalan-ness in art never stopped the *noucentista* milieu from also taking a keen interest in the avant-garde enquiries emerging around Europe. While refusing to uncritically adopt foreign novelties, *Noucentisme* was curious as to what these could bring to its project of modern art. In this regard, for example, a part of *Noucentisme* saw great value in the constructive intelligence and focus on structure it perceived in Cubism.⁵² Thus, the arrival of the first cubist exhibition in Barcelona in 1912 gave rise to a heated discussion of its perceived virtues and shortcomings in several issues of the *noucentista* *Pàgina Artística de La Veu de Catalunya*.⁵³

[32] Still, the bourgeois social context from which *Noucentisme* emerged, however keen on progress, conditioned the movement to pursue "a controlled evolution, not a revolutionary adventure".⁵⁴ Thus, the most radical avant-garde proposals, though considered and discussed, struggled to gain acceptance. Particular resistance was shown to tendencies towards abstraction as they ran counter to the social role attributed to art by *Noucentisme*. At any rate, the engagement of artists in this debate resulted in a heterogeneous artistic production that is sometimes difficult to class as either *noucentista* or avant-garde: artists like Pablo Gargallo, Manolo Hugué, and Josep de Togores oscillated between both currents; others, including Juli González and Joaquín Torres-García, initially aligned with, even heartily championed, *Noucentisme*, and subsequently veered towards more avant-garde positions.⁵⁵ It was all part of a dynamic art scene which gained further complexity during the First World War with the return to Barcelona of Catalan artists based abroad and the arrival of foreign ones drawn by Spain's neutrality in the conflict.

[33] Xavier Nogués' place in this scene appears to have been one of engagement in the debate from a critical standpoint towards certain aspects of both *noucentista* and avant-garde positions. As already noted, a substantial part of the discussion on modern art took place in the pages of art magazines. Nogués took

⁵⁰ Anonymous, "Saló de les Arts i els Artistes," in: *Vell i nou* 43 (15 May 1916), 22.

⁵¹ Peran i Rafart, Suàrez and Vidal i Jansà, *El Noucentisme*, 280.

⁵² Robert S. Lubar, "Cubism, Classicism and Ideology: The 1912 Exposició d'Art Cubista in Barcelona and French Cubist Criticism," in: *On Classic Ground: Picasso, Léger, de Chirico and the New Classicism 1910-1930*, ed. Elizabeth Cowling and Jennifer Mundy, London 1990, 309-323; and Christopher Green, *Picasso: Architecture and Vertigo*, New Haven 2005, 141.

⁵³ Minguet Batllori and Vidal i Oliveras, "Cronologia Crítica," 475.

⁵⁴ Peran i Rafart, Suàrez and Vidal i Jansà, *El Noucentisme*, 66.

⁵⁵ Fontbona, "The Art of Noucentisme," 170, 177.

an active role in this novel form of discussion when in 1914 he became co-editor with Feliu Elias of *Revista Nova*. This new magazine, financially backed by Santiago Segura (founder of the Galeries Laietanes a year later), was conceived with an explicit modernist intent, as expressed in its statement of purpose:

*Unlike current art publications dealing mostly with old art and archaeology, and only incidentally with modern art, this magazine will analyse and bring forth almost exclusively the latest artistic trends, so that the energy and anxieties of people with a new spirit will not find themselves unsupported as they have until now.*⁵⁶

[34] It was through his cartoons at *Revista Nova* that Nogués expressed his views, for example, on Cubism; contrary to the interest raised by this avant-garde proposal among some *noucentista* artists, Nogués takes a satirical view of Cubism (fig. 6). To a self-acknowledged cartoonist, draftsman and engraver, enquiries so deeply centred on the construction of the pictorial field through colour may have seemed somewhat removed from his own formal concerns; moreover, Cubism's disregard for subject matter was at odds with Nogués' own focus on daily reality and social dynamics, which was a key aspect of his critical practice. His own experimental endeavours would necessarily take other paths.



6 Xavier Nogués, cartoon “The Victim”, published in *Revista Nova* 12, 27 June 1914, 11. Caption: “I think I am actually beginning to look like my cubist portrait now”

Noucentista ideals and the ‘picturesque’ Catalan reality

[35] Nogués' attention to the reality around him went hand in hand with his interest in popular culture and art which, as mentioned before, was a key component of the *noucentista* artistic agenda. From 1914, he began translating this concern into a series of cartoons – published initially in *Revista Nova* – that gave graphic expression to phrases and sayings used in colloquial language. The

⁵⁶ Joan Torrent and Rafael Tasis, *Història de la Premsa Catalana*, Barcelona 1966, vol. 1, 526-527 (my translation).

humorous depiction of aphorisms and proverbs was far from a new practice, but Nogués' intention with this series of cartoons departed from this tradition. Eschewing the moralising, paternalistic tone often found in such representations, and taking instead his lead from Goya, an artist he greatly admired,⁵⁷ Nogués gave his cartoons an unequivocal critical tone mostly directed at the Catalan elites, thus implicitly critiquing *Noucentisme* from within. Indeed, Eugeni d'Ors' *Noucentisme* promoted an idealised image of Catalonia to be achieved through social, cultural and technical progress, in a process which reserved a major modernising role for art. In the face of this, Nogués composed instead a critical survey of the reality of Catalan society through its colloquial everyday language translated into cartoons. The result was not a flattering picture; the series showed a society of carefree drunkards, thieves and idle types prone to brawling, often before the eyes of a ridiculed bourgeoisie. Members of this class, recognisable by their top hats and black tailcoats, took the brunt of Nogués' social critique: before a society in disarray, they appeared outraged, alarmed, puzzled, or even joining in the ruckus, but invariably powerless to uphold order. When not having to witness lawlessness and disturbances, they were shown as socially unaware and pretentious, given to frivolous pursuits, outsmarted by the popular classes, or as pompous characters who enjoyed being fawned over (fig. 7). Nogués' message seems clear: if this was the society to be modernised through Mediterranean ideals and the civilising powers of art, *Noucentisme* had a monumental task ahead, and the bourgeois powers promoting it needed to ask themselves whether they were fit for the job.



7 Xavier Nogués, *Gastar fums* (Acting self-important), c. 1914, published in Xavier Nogués and Francesc Pujols, *La Catalunya pintoresca*, Barcelona 1919, 10.

[36] Furthermore, challenging d'Ors' classicist insistence on order, structure and beauty, Nogués executed these cartoons with particularly harsh lines and disorderly compositions, leaving little room for aesthetic enjoyment. In a further

⁵⁷ Vidal i Maynou, *Xavier Nogués*, 79.

turn of the screw, he later compiled the series into a book ironically entitled *La Catalunya pintoresca* (Picturesque Catalonia)⁵⁸ which has been considered “the masterwork of critical *Noucentisme*”.⁵⁹ Rather than graphically commenting on current events and political figures of the time, as caricature often did, what Nogués brought forth was a collective look in the mirror, one that forced *Noucentisme*’s utopian bourgeois ideology to consider its grasp on reality.

[37] There are mixed reports as to the reception of the *Picturesque Catalonia* cartoon book at the time. In the preface to the book’s second edition, Nogués himself maintains that the first one was a failure.⁶⁰ This, however, contrasts with a report by art critic Joan Sacs on the complete success of that first edition, which, he claims, immediately sold out.⁶¹ Judging from contemporary articles, Nogués’ grotesque, often unpleasant depiction of Catalan society was labelled monstrous by some, and several artists and critics then felt the need to defend his work from such criticism.⁶² Crucially for the purposes of this paper, the controversy generated by Nogués’ work touched directly on the question of its perceived modernity. Indeed, the value of humour and satire as a critical means to artistic renovation – namely, in the field of literature – had been explicitly underlined in the aforementioned 1884 *L’Avenç* article that first introduced the term modernist in the Catalan art scene:

*We believe that the lack of discussion in literatures is the reason that they lead an impoverished life and sooner or later die of consumption; that it is necessary to foster criticism and that this must err more on the side of severity than that of indulgence, if we want the Catalan rebirth/renaissance to bear ever more fruit of real worth both here and abroad; that the humorous and satirical criticism that such good results gives in other literatures must be put in practice in ours.*⁶³

[38] Thirty-five years on from this article, the same held true in the *Noucentisme* and Avant-garde context. Authors writing in support of Nogués’ work greatly valued his grotesque, unforgiving cartoons because of the collective self-criticism they prompted, which they considered an essential condition for modernity, both social and artistic. In the eyes of one of these authors, the fellow *noucentista* painter Josep Aragay, Nogués’ caricatures forced the movement to rethink some of its basic tenets, in particular those associated with Eugeni d’Ors’ emphasis on classical order and beauty:

⁵⁸ Of the fifty cartoons that make up *La Catalunya pintoresca*, published in 1919 by Salvat Papasseit Llibreters, fourteen had been published for the first time in *Revista Nova* in 1914, Cecília Vidal i Maynou, *La Catalunya pintoresca*, 6th ed., Barcelona 1990, 10.

⁵⁹ Francesc Fontbona, *La Catalunya pintoresca*, 5th ed., Barcelona 1987, v.

⁶⁰ Xavier Nogués and Francesc Pujols, *La Catalunya pintoresca: 50 gravats*, 2nd ed., Barcelona 1933, 4.

⁶¹ Joan Sacs, *Xavier Nogués*, Barcelona n.d. [1920s].

⁶² Josep Aragay, “Francesc Xavier Nogués,” in: *Instant revista quinzenal* Year 2, 4 (30 September 1919), 4; Josep Llorens i Artigas, “Xavier Nogués,” in: *La Veu de Catalunya Pàgina Artística* 513 (18 June 1920), 6; Anonymous, “La caricatura,” in: *Vell i nou* 96 (1 August 1919), 284-285.

⁶³ *L’Avenç* 22 (15 January 1884), supplement (my translation).

*To those who have ever criticised the monstrous picturesqueness of his [Nogués'] drawings, he can reply by laughing at their dreams of harmony and classicism, because such dreams conceived within the monstrosity of their spirit are nothing but a melancholy claim to ancient culture, and cannot go out onto the street other than shrouded, and artificial, and dead as all the dead in the cemetery.*⁶⁴

[39] Even from a strictly art-theoretical perspective, an unidentified author devoted an article to Nogués' work in *Vell i nou* magazine asserting the value of caricature's conceptualism to avant-garde artistic enquiries and progressive concerns:

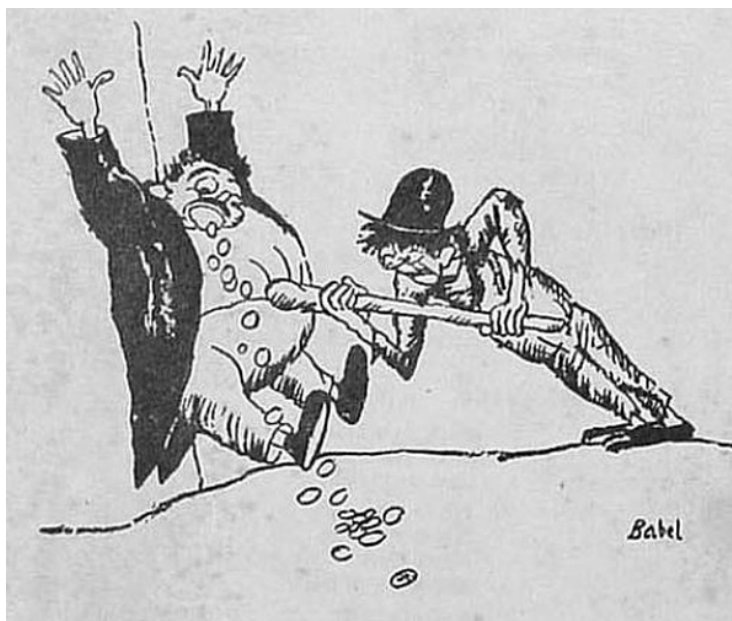
*Lately, the intensifying and conceptualist (symbolist) character of caricature has influenced pure art, as attested to by some of the schools of a more cerebral nature: Futurism, Cubism, even Literary Cubism. Today, only backward or barbarian peoples don't know caricature, and conversely, developed peoples are those who have practised it the most.*⁶⁵

[40] Nogués' positioning within the most restless sectors of the *noucentista* art milieu may explain his close interaction with the Catalan Avant-garde. This translated, for instance, into his participation in exhibitions organised by Agrupació Courbet, a group of avant-garde artists founded in 1918 by Joan Miró, Enric Cristòfol Ricart, Joaquín Torres-García and Josep Llorens i Artigas. Agrupació Courbet's exhibitions also included works by other artists more or less associated with Noucentisme, such as Joaquim Sunyer, Manolo Hugué and Josep de Togores.⁶⁶ We also find Nogués contributing to such a committed avant-garde magazine as *Un enemic del poble*. This publication, subtitled "folio of spiritual subversion", was named after Henrik Ibsen's 1882 play *An enemy of the people*. Founded in 1917, the magazine was edited by avant-garde poet Joan Salvat-Papasseit and operated from Galeries Laietanes. Its May 1919 issue features a cartoon by Nogués criticising bourgeois greed (fig. 8) through a well-fed character in a tailcoat vomiting coins when pressed in the stomach by a mugger. In spirit, this is not far from the only known war-related cartoon published by Nogués shortly after the start of the Great War. As part of the Popular Types series in *Revista Nova* and under the title *Mr. Cannons* (fig. 9), the cartoon denounces the destruction of civilization through war and death fuelled by capitalist greed.

⁶⁴ Aragay, "Francesc Xavier Nogués," 4 (my translation).

⁶⁵ Anonymous, "La caricatura," 285 (my translation). I would like to venture the possibility that this unidentified author is Joan Sacs (a.k.a. Feliu Elias and Apa), given his regular contribution to *Vell i nou* generally as a critic, his own practice as a caricaturist, and his known admiration for Xavier Nogués.

⁶⁶ Robinson, "Avant-Gardes for a New Century," 311.



8 Xavier Nogués, cartoon published in *Un enemic del poble* 18, May 1919, 1



9 Xavier Nogués, "Tipus populars: El Senyor Canons" (Popular Types: Mr. Cannons), published in *Revista Nova* 22, 3 September 1914, 13

[41] As contradictory as an anti-bourgeois stance would appear in an artist associated with *Noucentisme* – given the firm bourgeois backing of this movement – this facet of Nogués' work has attracted surprisingly little scholarly attention. A rare work addressing Nogués' political dimension is by Alexandre Cirici. This author rightly draws a clear distinction between Nogués' class-conscious, critical work in the 1910s and his subsequent "bourgeois integration" in the 1920s.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Alexandre Cirici, "Xavier Nogués entre l'expressionisme popular i la integració burgesa," in: *Serra d'Or Portantveu del 'Chor Montserratí'* 151 (15 April 1972), 90-95.

[42] Thus, despite Nogués' lack of interest in purely formal artistic enquiries, we find him associated with elements of the Catalan Avant-garde. His readiness to be critical of *Noucentisme*, even from within the movement, and to satirise the bourgeoisie promoting it, appears to have earned him credibility among those sectors of the Avant-garde that advocated a socially destabilising role for art, and recognised the artistically subversive potential of caricature.

The Galeries Laietanes project

[43] Shortly after the controversial cartoons of the 'picturesque Catalonia' series began to appear in *Revista Nova*, the magazine's promoter and financial backer, Santiago Segura, asked Nogués to undertake the decoration project in the cellar of Galeries Laietanes. Nogués already had some experience in mural painting, gained under Aleix Clapés at Gaudí's Casa Milà between 1904 and 1906.⁶⁸ At Galeries Laietanes, however, he opted for a completely unconventional approach to this medium by using caricature to cover the walls of both rooms in the aforementioned celebration of Mediterranean life and wine culture.

[44] The mural decoration he designed stayed *in situ* until the 1940s when it was stripped off into panels and put up for sale. With the exception of some elements that were purchased by private collectors,⁶⁹ most of the composition is currently kept, and partially exhibited, at the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona. An in-depth monographic study of the Galeries Laietanes project has yet to be carried out. This would allow to determine, for example, the precise location in the cellar of each of the thirty-odd panels that it was broken up into.⁷⁰ It would also help to establish how they related to one another in the original composition and what meanings might be inferred from these relationships. However, a basic survey of the extant disconnected panels already suggests that Nogués took the mural as an opportunity to further his internal critique of *noucentista* principles.

[45] The classical and Mediterranean element championed by *Noucentisme* is clearly part of the cellar decoration: from the wine theme to the arcades opening up (in some cases) to idyllic land- and seascapes, or the numerous Renaissance and Baroque ornamental citations.⁷¹ These set the scene for a complete gallery of Nogués' trademark characters, which are reminiscent of the *Revista Nova* / *La Catalunya pintoresca* cartoons. They are shown in various states of inebriation, enjoying life, misbehaving or just idling their time away under rows of arches complemented by popular sayings celebrating wine and its virtues. Again, an especially derisory treatment is reserved for the members of the bourgeoisie; characters in top hats and tailcoats are once more depicted powerlessly observing in dismay the antics of common people having a good time (fig. 10).

⁶⁸ Vidal i Maynou, *Xavier Nogués*, 135.

⁶⁹ Juan Cortés, "El 'Celler de les Galeries Laietanes' en el Museo de Arte Moderno," in: *Anales y boletín de los museos de arte de Barcelona* 9 (1951), 159-160.

⁷⁰ The exact number of panels is not known.

⁷¹ Alícia Suàrez and Mercè Vidal i Jansà, "Noucentisme and the Revival of Classicism," in: *Barcelona and Modernity*, 260-265, here 231.



10 Xavier Nogués, fragment of mural paintings, originally at the Galeries Laietanes cellar, 1915, tempera on plaster, 210 x 365 cm. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona (© MNAC, Barcelona, 2014, photograph by Jordi Calveras)

[46] In one of the cellar's largest panels (fig. 11), one such character is used as the decorative sculpture topping a fountain that sprouts wine instead of water. In an outraged hand-on-hip posture (also visible in the bourgeois character in fig. 10) and with his hat resting directly on his nose, he watches from his high position as a man strangles a cat while another struggles to stand upright under the effects of drink. Above, an inscription offers a popular saying: "meat makes flesh, and bread makes belly, but wine leads to dancing".



11 Xavier Nogués, fragment of mural paintings originally at the Galeries Laietanes cellar, 1915, tempera on plaster, 209 x 272 cm. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona (© MNAC, Barcelona, 2014, photograph by Jordi Calveras)

[47] Amidst all the merry drinking and carefree enjoyment of life, a single female figure appears oddly out of place (fig. 12); tucked under one of the arches and soberly wrapped in a blue mantle, she represents *La ben plantada*, a cherished icon of *Noucentisme*.



12 Xavier Nogués, fragment of mural paintings, originally at the Galeries Laietanes cellar, representing *La ben plantada*, 1915, tempera on plaster, 209 x 93 cm. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona (© MNAC, Barcelona, 2014, photograph by Jordi Calveras)

[48] *La ben plantada* – meaning both ‘of good presence’ and ‘firmly rooted’ – was the protagonist of a novel of the same title written in 1911 by Eugeni d’Ors, who initiated *Noucentisme* and remained one of its main ideologists. In line with the spirit of the movement promoted by this author, the novel’s heroine embodied his vision for a new, modern Catalonia; a serene Mediterranean beauty, invulnerable to any chaos, ugliness, or incivility that might surround her. The book became “the bible of the new Catalan mythology” and her protagonist’s portrayal as a strong, dignified woman was a recurrent theme in *noucentista* painting and sculpture.⁷² In 1911, a few years before the Galeries Laietanes mural project, Nogués had been asked to create an engraving for the cover of the novel. In his illustration (fig. 13), *La ben plantada* – a woman of good presence – stood tall, modest and composed, unperturbed by the commotion raised by a number of small, agitated, caricaturesque male figures harassing her.

⁷² Fontbona, “The Art of Noucentisme,” 174.



13 Xavier Nogués, cover illustration for Eugeni d'Ors' *La ben plantada*, 1911, etching and aquatint

[49] Four years later, Nogués chose the same combination of characters – *La ben plantada* surrounded by cartoon-like male figures – to cover the walls of a venue for the discussion of contemporary art and culture. His decision to recreate at Galeries Laietanes the characters he had first depicted on the cover of the *noucentista* “bible” suggests that his design for the gallery’s basement was more than a random assortment of carefree drinkers thematically suited to the intended relaxed atmosphere of the place; the cartoon composition appears to contain, in fact, a clear reference to the movement itself.

[50] At the cellar, *La ben plantada* is placed high, in a sort of niche between heavily decorated baroque columns. Below her, still between the columns, stands a bourgeois character, his body facing the *noucentista* icon, hands behind his back, as if he were admiring a painting on a wall; but instead, his head is turned towards the observer. Four years after d’Ors’ utopian vision for the Catalan land – and with the admired European nations at war – the bourgeois character considers its symbolic representation still surrounded by the same unruly crowd and offers a quizzical expression that seems to ask the cellar’s users: “What became of our ideal Catalonia?”

[51] Yet, Nogués’ critique of *Noucentisme* at Galeries Laietanes went beyond the subject matter. At the time, the nature, purpose and means of mural painting were the subject of a heated debate that occupied critics and artists alike. In the articles devoted to it in *Revista Nova* in 1914,⁷³ Joan Sacs – the magazine’s joint-editor together with Nogués – discussed, for instance, the benefits of using either volumetric effects or what he calls “flat” painting techniques on walls. He also made a clear and critical reference to “the leaders of our movement advocating the resurrection of mural painting in the belief that it is infinitely superior to easel

⁷³ Joan Sacs, “De pintura mural: I - Les manies,” in: *Revista Nova* 15 (18 July 1914), 7-8; Joan Sacs, “De pintura mural: II - La superstició,” in: *Revista Nova* 16 (24 July 1914), 5.

painting".⁷⁴ Against this background, Nogués' project at Galeries Laietanes can therefore also be seen as stating his position in this debate. Indeed, as a movement committed to a socially engaged art, *Noucentisme* theory valued the potential of mural painting highly for reaching large swathes of society with inspiring artistic proposals. Spearheaded by Joaquín Torres-García, this endeavour advocated fresco painting as the most "noble" form of mural art.⁷⁵ Nogués, on the contrary, treated the whole notion of wall painting with deliberate irreverence. Not only did he introduce humour and the formal language of caricature, a first at the time, but he also executed it summarily. Far from the artisan-like effort required by fresco painting, his characters and the arched composition framing them are, for the most part, simple large-scale drawings roughly executed on the wall with tempera and a thick paintbrush. In his articles, Joan Sacs also identified what he called the "obsessions" of *noucentista* mural painting theory: the requirements for "subdued colouring, decorative composition, stylization and morality".⁷⁶ In apparent defiance of these strictures, Nogués designed a mixed composition that includes various formal solutions, several of them executed in bright colours, with figures of all proportions shrunk or elongated to fit the available space, and occupied in morally dubious drink-induced activities.

[52] For its part, the formal harshness that characterised the *Revista Nova* cartoons all but disappeared in the gallery cellar. Still not attempting beauty, the lines were nevertheless softened to create a jolly and relaxed atmosphere. The purpose here was not to jolt the observer into a disagreeable reality, but rather to use the popular component of *Noucentisme* "as a counterweight to a sometimes obsessive mythological classicism inclined toward pedantry".⁷⁷ With his work at the cellar Nogués simply ensured that the *noucentista* milieu would now meet up to discuss art surrounded by a subtle and good-humoured critique to its lofty ideals.

Caricature on applied arts media – ceramics and enamelled glass

[53] In line with the interrogative and critical approach to art that characterises modernism, the walls of the Galeries Laietanes cellar thus allowed Nogués to test the means and possibilities of caricature in order to mount a conceptual challenge to the artistic values held dear by his fellow *noucentistes*. It was a form of artistic enquiry that revolved around caricature, rather than around painting as a medium. An artistic enquiry that, in keeping with modernism's interest in media not hitherto valued by academic convention, Nogués also extended to enamelled glass and painted tiles. Traditionally seen as decorative crafts, these were art forms that he sought to update through the use of caricature. Enamelled glass had a centuries old history in Catalonia, with designs mostly limited to compositions of geometric and plant motifs. In cooperation with glass enameller Ricard Crespo, Nogués worked on overcoming the formal and technical challenges presented by applying his popular characters to the curved,

⁷⁴ Sacs, "De pintura mural: II - La superstició," 5.

⁷⁵ Joan Sacs, "Els frescos del Manel Cano," in: *Revista Nova* 12 (27 June 1914), 7-8, here 7.

⁷⁶ Sacs, "De pintura mural: I - Les manies," 8.

⁷⁷ Comadira, "The Forms of Paradise," 251.

transparent surfaces of glass cups and saucers.⁷⁸ The first pieces were, coincidentally, related to the Laietanes project: wine cups and glasses populated by his drunkards, for the use of the artists, critics and writers assembling in the gallery's cellar (fig. 14).



14 Xavier Nogués, *Borratxet* (Drunkard), c. 1916-1918, enamelled glass. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona (© MNAC, Barcelona)

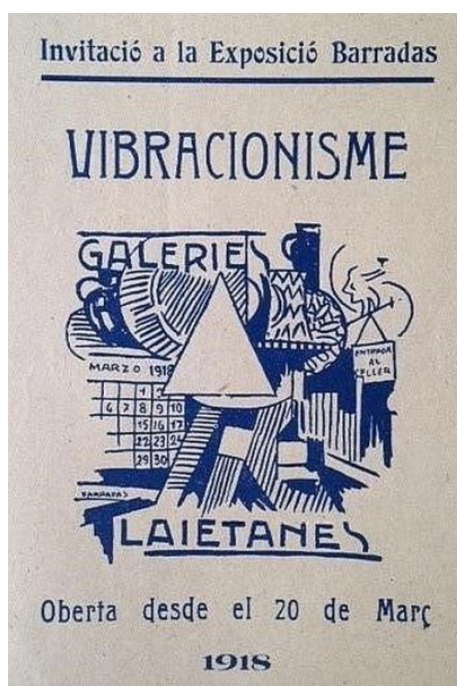
[54] The formal treatment of the figures was largely based on simple contours that were then coloured in using traditional enamelling techniques now adapted to in order to achieve new chromatic effects. The technical difficulties of transposing his cartoons onto glass are apparent in the image provided showing how the colour fields could become accidentally fragmented. The *Galeries Laietanes* cups were very warmly received and gave rise to an extensive production of enamelled glassware in collaboration with Ricard Crespo. Nogués' interest in this material as a medium for cartoons helped establish its value as an art form. His pieces became the object of exhibitions⁷⁹ where they also earned the praise of avant-garde artists for his innovative approach to a traditional medium. Among those who took an interest in Nogués' and Crespo's enamelled glass we find Josep Llorens i Artigas, a ceramist who played a key role in bringing ceramics to the fore of modern artistic practice and who collaborated with Joan Miró in the latter's ceramic works.⁸⁰ It is worth reiterating this appreciation of Nogués' work in avant-garde circles despite his disinterest in the medium-specific purely aesthetic enquiries associated with an exclusively formalist notion of modernism. A further token of such recognition can be found in Rafael Barradas'

⁷⁸ Vidal i Maynou, *Xavier Nogués*, 190.

⁷⁹ In the 1920s, three exhibitions devoted to Nogués' and Crespo's work on this particular medium were held at *Galeries Laietanes*. Vidal i Maynou, *Xavier Nogués*, 194.

⁸⁰ See Josep Llorens i Artigas, "Els vidres meravellosos: Xavier Nogués – Ricard Crespo," in: *La mà trencada. Revista quinzenal de totes les arts* 3 (11 December 1924), 37-38.

design for an invitation leaflet to his own exhibition of *vibrationist* work at Galeries Laietanes in 1918 (fig. 15). To the right of the composition a small sign reads *entrada al celler* (cellar entrance). Balanced just above it, a small figure, hand on hip and wine glass aloft, cites in schematic lines Nogués' trademark drinking characters that inhabit the venue below. It could be read as a small, but eloquent tribute by a contemporary avant-garde artist to Nogués' contribution to the art scene of his time.



15 Rafael Barradas, invitation leaflet to the vibrationist exhibition at Galeries Laietanes, 1918, ink on paper

Conclusion

[55] From the 1890s to the 1920s Barcelona was a lively hub of artistic creation and debate with a focus on modernity. The explicit pursuit of the modern that had been initiated by the *Modernisme* movement gathered pace with the new century among practitioners of *Noucentisme* and the Avant-garde. As part of *Noucentisme*, Xavier Nogués showed an active and critical engagement in the artistic discussions of his time. A recognised draughtsman and engraver, Nogués produced his most thought-provoking work in the form of caricature; he took cartoons out of their conventional medium – printed paper – and experimented with them on a range of media, from plastered walls to painted tiles and glassware, at widely differing scales and each requiring its own formal and technical solution. His work was thus in synch with the experimental approach to the popular and applied arts shown by his contemporaries in the international art scene, an interest historiographically acknowledged as a key aspect of modern art.⁸¹

[56] In the process he challenged *noucentista* notions of beauty and the inspiring role of art and injected a dose of collective self-reflection into the movement. His

⁸¹ Grenier, "A History of Global Art," 3.

work simultaneously incorporated *Noucentisme's* classicism, Mediterranean-ness and interest in popular culture and applied art forms, while questioning the wisdom of pursuing modernity through a bourgeois-backed artistic programme, and challenging its belief in the superior nature of mural painting. In so doing, he also contributed to the broader modern discussion on the validity of the distinction between 'high' and 'low' art.

[57] Nogués' work was consciously and purposefully representational and, being satirical in nature, was inevitably socially engaged. From an informed position on artistic developments throughout Europe, gained at least through his involvement with *Revista Nova* magazine, he chose not to occupy himself in the self-referential pictorial pursuits that would come to define formalist modernism. In opposition to these, he experimented instead with the formal, technical, expressive and conceptual possibilities of caricature. His work put forward a novel proposal in the Catalan art scene of the early 20th century. It was a valid one inasmuch as it triggered reactions – both positive and negative – among *noucentista* and avant-garde practitioners, as well as from the public, thus enriching the debate, even if only locally.

[58] Returning to the original question of this paper, Nogués' work, despite its lack of international resonance, is also, I would argue, a proposal of interest to art history in that it shows just how broad the contemporary debate on the nature and purpose of modern art actually was. At the time, the strive for modernity in art certainly included, but was not limited to, medium-specific formal enquiries. Regardless of the more concrete '-ism' artists identified with – whether *Modernisme*, *Noucentisme*, Cubism or *Vibracionisme*, among others – achieving modernity in art called for a new approach to the creative process which required innovative, challenging proposals and an informed engagement in a critical debate. It was an interrogative practice that went well beyond the aesthetic, encompassing also the social, technical and, crucially, conceptual aspects of art. In fact, in critically discussing what modern art *should* be, modernism thus understood actually showed *everything* that modern art *could* be, which included works such as Nogués' mural caricatures at Galeries Laietanes.

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